

Seeing and Experiencing Chouinard The Body Language of the Spectator

Katherine Cornell

Volume 30, numéro 1, 2008

Danse au Canada
Dance in Canada

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/018840ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/018840ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)
1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Cornell, K. (2008). Seeing and Experiencing Chouinard: The Body Language of the Spectator. *Ethnologies*, 30(1), 157–176. <https://doi.org/10.7202/018840ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article emprunte le concept de chora, cher à Julia Kristeva, pour décrire et analyser le corps du danseur ainsi que le corps du spectateur. Dans *La révolution du langage poétique*, Kristeva postule que la chora est analogue aux rythmes kinésiques et vocaux du corps. En tant que spectatrice et que danseuse confirmée, je trouve que mon corps réagit instantanément et rythmiquement aux spectacles de danse, établissant ainsi un lien avec la chora. En conséquence, l'acte d'écrire devient la manifestation physique de l'expérience théâtrale. Dans mes recherches, je m'interroge à savoir quel rôle le corps joue-t-il dans la transmission de la danse au langage ? Comment l'essence de la chora est-elle transmise du danseur au spectateur de la performance ? Les écrits de Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes et John Martin apportent des bases théoriques importantes pour l'étude du corps qui permettent de répondre à ces questions. Ayant conscience que dans chaque sujet se trouve une chora, j'examine le transfert de la chora du danseur au spectateur dans l'œuvre de la chorégraphe montréalaise Marie Chouinard et, plus spécifiquement, au travers du danseur solo dans *Des feux dans la nuit*. Marie Chouinard est une des chorégraphes contemporaines parmi les plus reconnues au Canada et internationalement. Cet article examine l'impact du corps qui danse sur le spectateur.

SEEING AND EXPERIENCING CHOUINARD

The Body Language of the Spectator.

Katherine Cornell

Ryerson University

Julia Kristeva's semiotic chora¹ is difficult to define but is most analogous to the vocal and kinetic rhythms of the body. Kristeva's theory, from *Revolution in Poetic Language*, centres on the concept of the semiotic as it interacts with the symbolic as realized through language. The symbolic represents the relationship between the signifier (the word) and the signified (the item being represented by the word) and is associated with paternal laws in linguistics. The semiotic is based on the influence of the bodily (Freudian) drives,² transferred from mother to the child, on the formation of language. Everyone has these pre-operational drives (that originate in the body) before the acquisition of language and these drives underpin all action and choice. At the heart of the semiotic is the chora, a term she borrows from Plato. The chora is the place where the subject is both generated and negated. The chora is that which cannot be signified; it is intangible yet constantly present in the body. Kristeva developed her theory about the chora in order to examine the linguistic nuances of poetry. However, the rhythmic energy of the chora has applications in other art forms as well. For example, complex vocal and kinetic rhythms are at the heart of dance, particularly contemporary dance where the rhythm produced by the dancing body is often the only score in the performance. An appreciation and

-
1. Julia Kristeva is a post-structural linguist and a psychoanalyst. She studied with Roland Barthes and her writing is often considered along with other feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous. She developed her theory of the semiotic in *The Revolution of Poetic Language* (2004).
 2. Freud identified five unconscious drives associated with aggression and the libido that make up primary process thinking.

attentiveness to these rhythms is passed from choreographer to dancer³ and then from dancer to spectator. With an awareness of the chora in each subject, I want to examine the transfer of the chora from the dancer to the spectator and its impact on writing in the work of Montreal choreographer Marie Chouinard, specifically the solo *Des feux dans la nuit*.

The bearing of the spectator's gender to the gaze has been established in reception theory;⁴ I contend that the spectator's body is equally relevant in interpreting signs, images, and rhythms in performance.⁵ Reception theory in theatre, particularly the writings of Marvin Carlson, recognizes that audience members interpret the signs in a production differently (and that each performance is a unique experience in time).⁶ Specifically, in dance, the audience uses its body to interpret signs. As an audience member who also trained as a dancer, I find my body responds instantaneously to performances and the act of writing becomes the physical manifestation of the theatrical experience. Therefore, my research questions include: what role does the body play in the transmission of dance to language? How is the essence of the chora transferred from dancer to spectator in the experience of watching a performance? The writings of Julia Kristeva (1984), Roland Barthes (2002) and John Martin (1983) provide important theories of the body that aid in answering these research questions. Kristeva's theories regarding the importance of the body to language are particularly applicable to this examination. Furthermore, Roland Barthes' terms *geno-song* and *pheno-song* apply Kristeva's concepts because these concrete terms offer functional examples of the semiotic and symbolic in action. Finally, John Martin's term *metakinesis*, the transference of

-
3. Many choreographers use the term *interpreter* instead of *dancer* to denote the important role the performer plays in the dissemination of the choreography. I will use the term *dancer* in this article for simplicity's sake. I acknowledge that not all dance is only created by the choreographer and taught by the choreographer to the dancer(s). (Certainly, improvisation and solo work stand out as exceptions to this rule.) However, a majority of productions have this format and therefore it is the basis of my inquiry.
 4. Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1999) established the concept of the male gaze.
 5. Age, ethnicity, race and class can also affect reception. This article focuses on the body because of the use of dance as example.
 6. For more on reception theory in theatre see Fortier, Mark. 1997. *Theory/theatre: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge.

energy between the dancer and spectator, connects dance to Kristeva's chora.

Kristeva's theory of the chora, as mediated by the subject, is central to my idea of the embodied spectator. Much of her discussion revolves around the relationship of the subject (reader) to the text (not unlike the relationship of the spectator to the performance). According to Kristeva, the self is formed in language. Her subject-in-process is constantly in flux and on trial depending on the setting and stimulation by other objects or subjects. Ultimately, she develops "a theory of signification based on the subject, his formation, and his corporeal, linguistic and social dialectic" (Kristeva 1984: 15). I am particularly interested in the corporeal experience of the subject/spectator because I think it will provide a wealth of material for looking at dance.

In addition, Kristeva's terms pheno-text and geno-text, as used by Roland Barthes in the analysis of song, also have an application to dance studies. The pheno-text and the geno-text represent the functional elements of the symbolic and the semiotic within the text. The pheno-text is functional language that communicates. The semiotic process is not present in the pheno-text, whereas the geno-text encompasses both the "semiotic processes but also the advent of the symbolic" (Kristeva 1984: 86). In other words, the pheno-text is the structural and formal part of language that is not influenced by the body, whereas the geno-text includes both linguistic devices and vocal and kinetic rhythms. Kristeva asserts that the geno-text is a process that articulates ephemeral structures embedded in phonematic and melodic devices. In the article, "The Grain of the Voice," Roland Barthes utilizes these salient terms, from Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*, and transfers them to music. Barthes employs the pheno-song and geno-song to define the difference between the form and technique of a song (pheno) and the expression and shape of a song (geno). He uses two vocalists as examples of his theory; one is a technician that displays the pheno-song and the other is an artist that demonstrates the geno-song, an indescribable ephemeral quality in performance. Barthes recognizes, "the progressive movement from the language to the poem, from the poem to the song and from the song to its performance" (Barthes 2002: 53). Hence the significance of the original words is intrinsic to both the pheno-song and the geno-song. He continues to his central argument, "The 'grain' is the *body* in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs [my italics]"

(54). The embodied artist/performer corresponds directly to Kristeva's embodied poet, in touch with both the semiotic and the symbolic in his/her work. The "grain" resides in the body and transports performance to a highly expressive and aesthetic place.

In dance, the grain of the movement materializes only in the grounded dancer. As Barthes notes, the grain is the body in the limb as it performs. The breath feeds the body and flows through the limbs initiating all movement. Notably, the dancer who does not breathe continuously often appears disconnected to the movement and even disengaged from parts of his or her body. Dancers often describe this kind of faulty execution as being outside the body, or not grounded. The contemporary dancer's relationship to both breath and gravity are crucial to the grain of the movement. The grounded dancer works in harmony with gravity and moves with ease, rhythm and breath. The pheno-text and geno-text are certainly evident in dance when comparing a technically brilliant performance to that of a passionately embodied performer. These terms are problematic when choreography lacks a textual basis (such as Barthes example of the evolution of the poem to song to performance). Many dances draw inspiration from writing, but the dissemination of choreography requires both vocal and kinetic statements on the part of the choreographer when working with dancers. Those statements by the choreographer, both verbal and physical, could be considered the text of the dance. For the purposes of this article, the terms pheno-dance and geno-dance will be used to describe a dancer's function in choreography. The pheno-dance describes a technical performance that demonstrates athletic skill whereas geno-dance describes a performance that goes beyond gesture and the placement of body parts to something more metaphysical. The distinction between pheno-dance and geno-dance allows the spectator to recognize a performance that transcends to the ephemeral. Only performances that demonstrate the geno-dance allow for the transmission of the chora from dancer to spectator.

Kristeva's theory of the chora is imbedded in the rhythms of the body. These rhythms can be tied to dance through Barthes ideas about the application of the geno-text in music. From there, we need to connect the chora of the dancer through geno-dance to the spectator; metakinesis offers this possibility. John Martin⁷ began writing about

7. John Martin was the dance critic for the New York Times from 1927 to 1962. He championed modern dance.

metakinesis in 1930. He argued that the medium of dance can transfer emotional and aesthetic information from the consciousness of one individual to another and that information is transmitted through both physical and psychic material. Notably, metakinesis recognizes that there is more to dance than just what the eye can perceive. What Martin defines as emotional and aesthetic information could encompass the chora. His theory focuses on dissecting the ephemeral qualities of expressive dance (specifically the work of Mary Wigman).⁸ In addition, these writings attempt to analyze the metaphysical qualities of dance. Metakinesis provides a connection between the mind and body of the dancer, and the empathy felt by the spectator. Martin's writing emphasizes the complex relationship and the transference of energy between the dancer and the spectator.

Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes and John Martin establish the precedence that the body plays a central role for the spectator and specifically the spectator in the act of writing about dance. When the performance offers a geno-text, the chora of the choreographer flows through the dancer(s) to the spectator. The most vivid way I can demonstrate how the essence of the chora is transferred from dancer to spectator in the experience of watching a performance is to write about a specific piece of dance, *Des feux dans la nuit* by Marie Chouinard.

Academic Treatment of Marie Chouinard

Choreographer Marie Chouinard reveals the body on stage. Chouinard's choreography stands out because of her intense physicality and intimate aesthetic. She began her career as a solo artist in 1978 and then created a company in 1990 which performs group works as well as solos.⁹ As a dancer and a choreographer, her movements are raw and exposed. Dance critic Deborah Jowitt states that "Chouinard builds powerful art from the tension between transgressiveness and artful structures" (Jowitt 2000: 129). For example, Chouinard clearly transgresses society's notions of gender and private regulation of the

8. Notably, Susan Manning uses Martin's theory and expands it in *Ecstasy and the demon* (1993). Manning states that the spectator (as representative of the collective body) empathizes more with the modern dancing body because of metakinesis (or kinesthesia). She defines kinesthesia as the ability of one body to sense another body and to re-experience physically sensations projected by that other body.

9. <http://www.mariechouinard.com/flash.html> (retrieved access July 27, 2005).

body. Her choreography invites controversy because she questions gendered movement and, at times, makes intimate experiences (like urination and masturbation) into performative acts. Kristen Anderson, a dancer in *Compagnie Marie Chouinard*, explains that Chouinard prefers nudity in her works because she wants to exceed the visible to see inside the body (indeed, Anderson feels that Chouinard would have them dance without their skin, if it was possible).¹⁰ Chouinard's choreography warrants examination because of her exploration of the feminine adjacent to, or imbedded in, the masculine. Her solos, in particular, have ritualistic qualities and driving rhythms; the solos present the opportunity to examine the intersection of the private and the collective — a fertile ground for the exploration of the body and the chora.

The company website explains that Chouinard's choreography focuses on the body itself, stating, "as a carrier of meaning, each gesture becomes the 'phoneme' of a thought imbedded in the body, while form reflects the dancer's soul as it resides in organs, cells and energetic circuits."¹¹ Notably, Chouinard uses a grammatical term: "phoneme",¹² to represent the smallest cell of her choreographic body. Clearly, choreography is akin to language for Chouinard. Her reference to grammar and the energy circuits of the body provide a link between her artistic statement and the ideas of Julia Kristeva.

Dance scholars Ann Cooper Albright and Tamar Tembeck relate Chouinard's choreography to feminist theory. My research will also use some feminist theory — regarding the role of the body in language — to analyze Chouinard's work from the perspective of the spectator. Cooper Albright illustrates Chouinard's ability to transform and manipulate her female body and the theoretical implications of her choreography. Tembeck examines the re-occurring motifs of feminist representations in Chouinard's work. She acknowledges that the notion of the female "auteure" remains subversive today (Tembeck 2000: 192). Tembeck argues that Chouinard's mere existence as a female "auteure"

10. I first saw *Compagnie Marie Chouinard* in 1999 at the *Premiere Dance Theatre* in Toronto. I attended a talk back after the performance where the dancers talked about the experience of working with Marie Chouinard.

11. <http://www.mariechouinard.com/flash.html> (retrieved access July 27 2005).

12. A phoneme is the smallest unit of any language; a minimal yet distinct sound (e.g. "b").

is an activist statement that represents female spectators' desires for self-authorship. I would add that an auteure/choreographer's own body plays an important role in the creation process (like many other dancer/choreographers). It is not just her existence as an "auteure" but how she imprints her body on the choreography that makes it remarkable. The dancer/interpreter receives oral and kinetic information and then transfers the author's bodily gestures — indelibly marked with choreographer's chora — onto his or her own body. This imprint is a particularly important transference in the case of *Des feux dans la nuit* where Chouinard's female body projects masculinity and transposes it onto a male body. Chouinard's choreographic écriture féminine invites the spectator to consider dance in relationship to the constructed self. Indeed, her complex visceral choreography offers numerous ways to look at the body.

Writing About Dance: the Embodied Spectator

Currently dance scholars use two primary methods of describing and analyzing dance, written and visual. Within these categories there are several examples. In language, dance is conveyed by description, metaphor, and analysis. As Barthes put it, adjectives (used as metaphor and imagery) are often the only tool of the writer to convey the action on stage (2002). Technical methods that document movement can also take the form of written description; for example, Laban Movement Analysis dissects every minute gesture in reference to the body, effort, shape and space. Movement analysis can be recorded either in words or in a visual script like a musical score where each scratch represents a gesture (such as Labanotation or Benesh Notation).¹³ Unfortunately, movement analysis is a highly codified text that requires training to read. In contrast, photographers and videographers can capture dance visually as a means of literally recording what occurred. However, the visual method rarely stands alone — photographs appear next to text, film and video, and are often narrated to provide context and/or a play by play analysis. The written method often fails to capture the detail of the performance, whereas the visual method fails to transfer the experience of witnessing a production. Often the most vivid written

-
13. Labanotation, developed by Rudolf Laban, is used primarily to record modern dance but can record any kind of movement. Benesh notation, conceived by Rudolf Benesh, is more stylized and is used to record ballet.

descriptions of the dance come from practitioners themselves because of their privileged bodily experience of the choreography. Therefore, the idea of an embodied spectator writing about dance would provide a multi-dimensional perspective, especially when combined with a visual stimulus. Ann Cooper Albright writes,

in order to make sense of the dancing, the viewer must try to remember the flickering traces of earlier movements at the same time as s/he is watching the next series of motions. This ongoing process rarely stops long enough for the connections to catch up, and for this reason dance can be difficult to watch and even more problematic to write about [my italics] (1995: 160).

This ongoing evolution of the spectator resembles Kristeva's subject-in-process. In addition, Cooper Albright continues that this process of making sense of the dancing "allows for an intricate layering of visual, kinesthetic and cultural meaning in which bodies, sexualities and identities can begin to restage the terms of their alliance" (160). In other words, the subject-in-process may see any combination of visual, kinesthetic or cultural meanings in a dance; the bodies, sexualities and identities present, or absent, on stage contribute to the meaning of the dance and the experience of the spectator. Cooper Albright's argument focuses on sexuality but has further applications. I agree that dance scholarship needs this layered approach — one that does not privilege the visual over the kinesthetic or the cultural. Therefore, I propose, that to make sense of the dancing, the writing spectator needs to embody the memory of the dance. Expressions such as "the audience was caught on the edge of their seats" resonate because being a spectator is a bodily experience as well as a visual experience. In order for the writing spectator to effectively convey the content and meaning of the dance to readers, the spectator must make the connection between mind and body.¹⁴

Cooper Albright considers the spectator in relationship to the dance and examines the function of the dancing body in Chouinard work. In *Des feux dans la nuit*, the male body acts as a catalyst for the choreography. The programme note for the work does not offer a textual inspiration for the work; it states, "Marie Chouinard creates an intense, disturbing variation on virility and the metaphors it suggests.... the solo unfolds

14. Only through both the visual and the kinesthetic understanding can we begin to assess the cultural.

in space like a journey through the intimacy and fragility of man.”¹⁵ In the past, as Cooper Albright notes, the work and movement of Vaslav Nijinsky has motivated Chouinard’s work, specifically in *The Afternoon of a Faun* and *The Rite of Spring*. In *The Afternoon of a Faun*, she places Nijinsky’s movement in her body, thereby questioning the maleness of the original movement and simultaneously imbuing it with her own bisexual take on the anthropomorphic body; her faun has a phallus and breasts. Her fascination with Nijinsky, as both a dancer and a choreographer, is also apparent in her solo for Elijah Brown in *Des feux dans la nuit*. Visual references to his works, and his way of moving, litter this piece. *Des feux dans la nuit* premiered in 1999 and was Chouinard’s first solo for a male dancer.

Description of *Des feux dans la nuit*: Dancer moving, Spectator experiencing.

The following description switches back and forth between the perspective of what I see in the body of the dancer, and what I feel in my own body. My bodily experiences as a spectator are represented here in italics.¹⁶

Des feux dans la nuit begins in low light, with a bare-chested male dancer at centrestage. His shaven head is lit from above and is the only visible body part. He wears a reflective strip of tape on his head so that when a ray of light is focused on him from beyond, he is able to reflect the beam out towards the audience. The piece begins in silence; the light initiates the movement. Slowly, the dancer scans across the stage, thereby examining the audience with the beam of light.

This refraction reverses the roles of the performer (object) and the spectator (subject). Suddenly, as a spectator, I am conscious of being examined and illuminated in this dark space. The light, essentially, breaks the fourth wall and opens up the space. Despite, the size of the theatre,¹⁷ an intimacy with the performer is created.

15. <http://www.mariechouinard.com/flash.html> (retrieved access July 27, 2005).

16. This bifocal vision of the work resembles Solomon Volkov’s dual approach to the material from interviews in his book *Balanchine’s Tchaikovsky*, 1992. (Titles remain in italics as well.)

17. I attended the Ottawa premiere of this work at the National Arts Centre Theatre during the Canada Dance Festival (June 8, 2002). I have since studied the work again on video but my writing primarily reflects my embodied experience of the work in the theatre. I would argue this approach to dance writing absolutely requires having seen the work in a theatre.

The light changes, so too does the dancer. The light source appears directly above his head and widens, illuminating the breadth of his shoulders and his outstretched arms.

With the shift in lighting, I am no long self-conscious but I am entranced by the sight of the dancer's whole body in stillness.

He bows his head, as if to examine his arms. He shares the stage with a musician who sits at a grand piano at upstage right. The subtle pulsating piano music, by Rober Racine, begins. The dancer remains still as the music washes over his body. He slowly gestures the right hand, it revolves palm down and then up; the left hand conforms and repeats the movement in opposition. This slow minimized gesture appears initiated by the fingers not the shoulder and therefore has a restrained quality. The arms oscillate back and forth and together — front and back, over and under. His face is cast in shadows. Suddenly, he flinches and exhales into a deep crouch with his elbows raised and bent. From this defeated position, he slowly stands and reaches his muscular arms to full arm span, a menacing posture of strength and potency. He morphs back to the initial position, head down/palms up and the sequence begins again. (This is the first phrase; and he repeats it throughout the work.)

The minute nature of this movement focuses my attention. My body is completely still in concentration, except for my breath. The rhythm of my breath promptly adjusts to follow the music and the movement. The music captivates my attention and draws me further into the piece. I take short and quick breaths while his hands oscillate but I exhale with the dancer as he yields to the crouching position.

Soon the arm movements increase in intensity and speed. He looks like he is tossing a ball between his hands. The actions of the arms affect the torso sending waves of convulsions upward. He succumbs to the crouch by bending his knees and pressing his weight into the ground then his upper body soars into the spread eagle arm position as he stands upright. With head bowed, he resembles a man hung on a crucifix. The light catches the glistening reflective tape on the top of his head.

I find myself holding my breath as his body convulses, as if his movements are trapping the air in my body. This section makes my body feel claustrophobic.

More bodily detail is added to his contracted position with arms drawn forward again, he swallows repeatedly. Convulsions ripple through

the vertebrae of his mid-back. His arms continue the “pass and catch” movement. All the while, his chest continues to heave and he looks like he is about to throw up. Suddenly he dives forward to the crouch quickly surfacing as if in water. This cycle his head is released back with neck exposed proffering wrists and palms forward in a movement of submission.

I find this vulnerable posture very difficult to watch. I curl my body forward in a protective response. I focus on his exposed neck. Tension builds in my muscles.

Now all movement is coordinated through the full body not just the arms: movement is initiated from the core at this point, not the extremities. The dancer appears exposed and defenseless. He drops the one arm heavily, as if pulled down by an invisible weight. His head rolls to the side, arms dangle palms back and he suddenly is the downtrodden character of Petroushka¹⁸ for a split second. Then he morphs again. With head cocked back, it appears he moves from his Adam’s apple. He moves each muscle with care, with contraction in some places and complete release elsewhere. He shudders from side to side still flipping arms, picking up speed. Then he becomes Nijinsky’s virile Faun by shifting into a two-dimensional representation and projecting his hands to one side.¹⁹

I laugh; the tension in my body dissipates. Chouinard seems obsessed with Nijinsky. These bodily references to famous photographs of Nijinsky feel like an inside joke. (I wonder if Nijinsky represents masculinity to her?)

The audience is drawn, by the nature of the lighting, to examine every sinew of his body in movement. The dancer represents the ideal anatomical specimen, at times resembling DaVinci’s Vitruvian Man. Next he reaches for something with both arms but he is denied. He retracts his arms into the shoulder socket reverberating back into the

18. The tragic character of Petroushka is a puppet who tries to escape the hold of his evil puppet-master. Nijinsky danced the difficult role, choreographed by Michel Fokine, as if he did not have any bones. See *Paris dances Diaghilev* [videorecording] 1990; director, Colin Nears; producer, Robin Scott. New York.

19. *L’Après-midi d’un faune* was a landmark work because Nijinsky had all the dancers move in a two-dimensional way that flattened their movement. The faun’s hands often directed the movement and had a phallic connotation. See *Paris dances Diaghilev* [videorecording] 1990; director, Colin Nears; producer, Robin Scott. New York: Elektra Entertainment.

spine and neck as the head drops backwards unsupported. Then, he succumbs to gravity again. This time from the crouch he arises hovering, peering towards downstage left and he steps forward. Notably, the lighting demarcates two distinct sections of the piece; in the first section the dancer remains almost entirely stationary illuminated by a spotlight, in the second section he travels all around the stage through shadow, diffused, and directed lighting. Therefore, this first step marks the beginning of the second section of the piece.

All light and stagecraft focus attention on upstage centre and the detailed movements of the dancer. I am relieved when he finally steps. The dramatic tension is released. My vision widens to take in the entire stage space. I feel attracted to the movements of his feet most. The lightness of his step is echoed in the weightless feeling in my body.

His legs are hidden in the shadow; therefore his steps disappear into the ether. He lifts a knee — but torso, head and arms remain focused on a spot. As that leg lowers, the other knee floats upwards. His gaze soars upwards, arms bent at the elbow and raised, head lifted, mouth open. It looks like he is screaming but no sound is heard. This prophetic pose is repeated to the left and then to the right.

I breathe shallowly following his stealthy movements. I focus on his hands because they seem to initiate the movement. When he releases upwards mouth open, there is a sense of euphoria.

He prowls the stage, with weighted arms pressing down into gravity whereas his upward release resists gravity. Then, arms still, he slowly scans the audience from stage left to right. Suddenly, he performs a series of shuddering movements that glide quickly horizontally across the stage. He releases downwards into a bent leg position, catching his breath. He repeats the quirky phrase in the opposition direction. The spasmodic movement quickly flashes in front of the audience. Only body parts are discernible: his arms move in and out, his mouth opens and closes and his feet shuffle side to side. This quirky phrase is classic Chouinard because it is hard to see yet incredibly compelling. It is multi-dimensional movement that is full of emotion and imagery.

I edge forward trying to see as much as possible. Then I take this movement into my body, shuddering subtly as he flits across the stage.

He repeats this series across the stage several times, with slight variations; each time giving into gravity for a moment in a still position at the side of the stage. In these moments of stillness he bares his full

weight. Then he changes dimension (more so than direction) and moves sideways. He opens and closes his arms and torso around an invisible partner. In this quirky phrase, he dances just above floor, as if ignoring the force of gravity.

His stillness resonates through my body. It feels like everyone in the theatre has just said "ohm" and the sound and breath echoes in my lungs. I can feel his stillness in my bones.

He moves back to the original position led by two fingers. He initiates the first phrase, much faster with head raised. Intermittently, he cycles around the spotlight walking either with a highly arched back or an unaffected walk. The dancer returns back to the stable spotlight and defiantly directs his hands to the starting position. His head is vertical, confronting the audience. Unexpectedly, he leans his torso forward and cycles his arms around in a pendulum action, like a wheel rocking back and forth. His legs cycle around the axis of the torso too, creating two layers of movement. He moves quickly.

His rapid movement is a shock to my system. At this point in time, I realize that his movement rarely corresponds with the repetitive droning piano music.

The tempo of the music is a constant, but the dancer's tempo evolves throughout the piece — increasing and decreasing at will. He returns to the beginning position, arms forward with a sense of strength. This time he repeats the pendulum in silence ending in an exhausted position, arms draped to the side, neck exposed. The silence is poignant.

I impose the overwhelming silence on my body. I hold my breath.

The dancer moves across to stage right, pacing. His movement is carved out by space, as if manipulated by an unseen force. He moves with a slithering quality. Then he slips downward into a spotlight. The music sounds downtrodden. He presses his cheek to the ground, and raises his legs vertically; his full weight suspended only on his arms. He remains in this awkward position for a long breath.

I look intensely. This incredible still position catches my breath and focuses my attention. I want to reorient my body to see him from all sides and perspectives. I wait anxiously for him to move.

The dancer slips out of the head stand easily. He progresses forward with jovial spurts of energy. Then he slides into the head stand again. He releases the position and rolls onto his back. With bent knees, his

hands initiate the writhing action. His back arches, spine ripples, head contracts and lowers — even his fingers and toes contract. He lifts his head to look at his toes. In this tight position, he rocks on the back of his body for an extended period of time. This sensual rhythm permeates his whole body.

This rocking motion is contagious and soothing. My pelvis capitulates. My body prefers this regulated movement.

Then the dancer arches in a slow orgasmic release. He rolls onto his elbows and the balls of his feet. He undulates like a worm across the stage. The thump of his body hitting the floor sounds like a heartbeat. He ends this phrase with head and hands planted — legs vertical and still.

This phrase is very satisfying to my body. I smile and exhale.

The dancer, now upright, stares and considers the space. He offers his palms forward; it is small bent movement, curious and contained, ending in a crouch. He walks to upstage centre, hands moving as if he is talking to someone. He returns to centre stage and turns to profile — he slowly raises the back arm erect over his head. His arm appears to move independently. Facing the side, he undulates his head, then his ribs and then his pelvis. His chest projects forward, filled with air, and then sinks backward. He progresses from this concentrated movement to a contrasting loose spin and then to traveling footwork. He returns to the profile and repeats the erection of the arm and the undulations through the spine.

I follow his arm with my eyes. The sterile movement has no effect on my body. But as he begins to move his ribs and chest, my body compresses as I concentrate on his muscles. He has such control that each muscle appears to move independently of the others. I am entranced.

The dancer performs a loose linking step across to centre stage. The steps do not have a discernable rhythm. He presses his shoulders back and reaches his chest forward with one arm extended and arm bent at the elbow. He holds this position and then only nods his head slightly. Then the dancer switches into a pedestrian walk towards the piano where he stands in a pool of light with wrists projected forward. His upper body stays still as his heels extend forward stepping on diagonal towards another spotlight. Once he reaches downstage left, he quickly

retreats from the light with upper arms attached to his ribs but palms open to the side in an apologetic movement.

I squint trying to grasp onto some element of this phrase. I press my weight backwards as he retreats.

He returns to the piano and begins the heel walks again but this time he stops at centre stage and opens his arms on the cross. Slowly he lifts his arms and chest up. He flips his palms up and down slowly lowering his arms to the original position. His hands briefly form fists. Next, he connects the thumb to the index finger splaying the other fingers creating a delicate hand position. He twists and turns his hands; the movement is adopted by his pelvis and ribs. As the twists and turns flow through his body, he resembles a swan, with an inverted shoulder as a wing. His legs trail behind his arms, circling in and out in figure eight shapes. He steps forward and then back taking the image through space towards downstage left. He turns his back to the audience and flips to face the side. His concave scooped torso begins a sensitive pose where his arms and fingers join to form a circle on the right side of his body.

This phrase washes over me. I breathe with him. I respond to the curvaceous movement by swaying from side to side as if caught in the tide. When the phrase ends, I feel somehow comforted by this circle shape.

He performs a similar chain of curvaceous steps on the balls of his feet to upstage. He recreates the open position; arms divergent, legs crossed, heels raised, and chin wobbling, searching for balance. He proceeds to close the shape while his hands flit and twist around his torso. His chest inhales into the open position which is now reminiscent of Nijinsky as the Golden Slave in *Scheherazade*.²⁰ Carving out space behind his body, the dancer slips into the spotlight in silence. With feet grounded, knees bent, torso leaning forward, elbows elevated, and eyes directed forward, he stands defiant.

This strong position motivates me to place my feet firmly on the ground and sit up straight.

His chest instigates a surging movement forward. He swims through space. He arrives at centre stage and inhales. His shoulders rise, arms float and head tilts. After an extended pause, he exhales — his head droops to one side and arms dangle.

20. *Scheherazade*, another ballet by Fokine, is based on the story *Thousand and One Nights*. Nijinsky, as the Golden Slave, reveled in life.

His collapse represents a bodily exhaustion to me. I free my body from tension and slump back in my chair, sensing his fatigue.

The dancer appears possessed in the next phrase. He is lit from the side in an eerie light. His head rolls around back and forth. Then the head and shoulders initiate the awkward steps forward on diagonal with arms trailing behind. He dances without control. This movement is juxtaposed by a focused spin immediately followed by a flopping motion that expresses frustration. He stops for a moment in the open position, head raised, heels lifted, and chest released upwards. He returns to the armless flop as the spotlight narrows around him.

His frantic energy builds up in me. The back and forth play with control and lack of control moves from my lungs to my hands. I flinch my fingers instinctually when he flops.

With a nod he assumes the starting position; clearly motivated by the music. This musicality is a shift in the shape of the choreography. His hands flip back and forth, form fists, and then reach around the wrists (as if he could grab the notes from the air).

I feel the notes travel up my spine.

As the light comes up, he commences the double pendulum movement again. Then he flops forward to upstage left. Walking with intent, he carves space as if talking while walking towards the piano. There, he lifts one arm up and straightens the other in opposition and is still for just a moment. He then performs several of the previous movement ideas. He advances across the stage heels first with quirky movements of the upper body that look like accentuated laughing. Next, the dancer walks in a neutral fashion around the stage to arrive at centre. Slowly, he tucks his pelvis forward and back. Facing stage left, he sits and places his arms forward as if ready to play the piano. His hand movements begin delicate and develop into more dramatic movements. He flicks, touches, presses and caresses space. He finishes with his arms fully elevated.

I inch forward as he sits. This contained movement focuses my attention again after the large full body choreography. I look and listen intently.

He stands and as if hung by his wrists. In this position, he gradually revolves for all to see. His shoulders roll causing his hips to respond. His arms follow the movement of the rest of his body. One leg swirls around from front to side, the opposing arm cycles around; he lifts his hip carefully to repeat to the other side. Then he raises his arms in an

Egyptian pose. His hands flip as he moves into shadow at the back of the stage. He emerges into the light holding a two-dimensional posture — both arms and head directed to the left, again like the Faun. After a moment of respite, he advances forward returning to the quick and quirky movement phrase then he pauses, caged by his own arms. The phrase and posture are repeated with variations. He seems trapped.

The stillness appeals to my body. I see and sense so much detail when he is still.

Caught under the spotlight, he skirts side to side around the light like a boxer. This affected masculine movement seems out of place. He moves to stage left and performs a series of arm movements; one raised, one bent, hands on solar plexus, one hand reaching forward, both arms opening at the elbow, for example. The movement evolves from standing to crouching and standing again. The dancer walks away towards the piano, leaving the fluctuations and frustrations behind. He retrieves a pair of roller blades and puts them on while the musician continues.

I cock my head to the side and curl my nose waiting to see what Chouinard will do with roller blades.

He waits, crouched on his skates, for the right sound. He looks tired but robust. He stands and his height is lit from the side. He pushes off one skate. He glides effortlessly around the stage in a figure eight shape.

In the seated position, I experience the figures of eight with my ribs. Suddenly I realize that figure eights are littered throughout the choreography.

His movement encompasses freedom. He reaches his arms out and the audience can feel the wind he generates. He arrives at centre stage. He stands on his skates in the light with his head forward and his arms raised. The music and the light gradually dissipate.

The audience is quiet for a moment as the last image permeates. I love this moment between performance and applause; it is the time spectators' bodies take to respond. I hum and exhale and I feel a sense of calm.

Reflection

The light at the beginning of the piece immediately establishes a connection and an intimacy between performer and spectator. Cooper

Albright clearly recognizes this immediacy stating, “there is no safe, aestheticized distance” (1995: 162) from the physicality of Chouinard’s work for the spectator. The embodied spectator is sucked into the Chrographer’s artistic vortex. Cooper Albright also notes that Chouinard never lets her audience settle back comfortably in their seat constantly catching their breath or putting them on edge (160). The intimate relationship between soloist and spectator makes Chouinard’s choreography a good example for examining the role of the spectator’s body.

My body clearly attended to the kinetic rhythms in *Des feux dans la nuit*, through stillness and flurry. The final poignant moment accentuated the importance of stillness in this choreography. The stillness provided a pathway to the chora of the work by making the only movement that of breathing. I was often compelled to breathe like the dancer and therefore to empathize with him. In opposition to the moments of stillness, *Des feux dans la nuit* was full of frenetic action that appeared to move faster than my eye. Chouinard’s dense phrases invoked speechlessness. It was impossible not to rely on imagery and metaphor when writing about dance. I often wanted to compare the dancer’s movements to something. But I discovered the best way to describe Chouinard’s most complex movement was to consider how it affected my body.²¹ When left speechless I relied on my imbedded bodily response.

Conclusion

This method of analyzing dance takes into consideration the bodies of the choreographer, the dancer, and the spectator. I hope it will speak to the practitioner, academic, and spectator alike. My dual assessment of Chouinard’s choreography gravitates towards the importance of breath and rhythm in the body: the central premise of Kristeva’s chora. This method of experiencing movement also depends on the presence of the geno-dance (the functional representation of the semiotic and symbolic in dance). I would argue that the geno-dance is the inherent goal of Chouinard’s choreography. Her dancers have exquisite training and technique that exemplify the pheno-dance, but that is never the

21. This methodology would have been impossible to do if I had not seen the piece live.

point of her choreography.²² Chouinard dissects the potential of dance that begins in the universal body and the life force.²³ Her choreography seeks to make visible the energies and rhythms inherent in the body. Through her own body, she imprints the geno-dance in the performance. The geno-dance reaches the spectator through metakinesis. The dancer communicates with the spectator on both the physical and the psychic level.²⁴ Chouinard's choreography pulsates with chora; this method of analysis tries to make that force visible.

Watching dance is an embodied experience and correspondingly so should writing about dance. Certainly, an embodied perspective on dance is not unique methodology. But often dance writers attempt to give the perspective of the dancer in the act of dancing (especially when the writer is a former dancer). I am advocating an embodied perspective on the part of the spectator. In addition, I would argue that the majority of the observations and experiences of the embodied spectator revolve around the transmission of the chora, the vocal and kinetic rhythms present in dance. This way of seeing and experiencing the dance sheds new light on the role of the body in theatrical performance.

22. For example, the dancer demonstrates athleticism and technical prowess in Graham, ballet, and even Indian dance styles in this piece, but that is hardly the point of the work.

23. <http://www.mariechouinard.com/flash.html> (retrieved access July 27, 2005).

24. For example, my physical epiphany regarding the figure eights at the end of the piece exemplifies how communication happens at several levels

References

- Barthes, Roland. 2002 [1991]. "The Grain of the Voice." In Michael Huxley and Noel Witts, eds., *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader* (2nd Edition): 49-56. New York: Routledge.
- Compagnie Marie Chouinard. <http://www.mariechouinard.com/flash.html>, retrieved July 27, 2005.
- Cooper Albright, Ann. 1995. "Incalculable Choreographies: The Dance Practice of Marie Chouinard." In Ellen Goellner and Jacqueline Shea Murphy, eds., *Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance*: 157-181. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Fortier, Mark. 1997. *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Jowitt, Deborah. 2000. "Eyes that Dance." *The Village Voice*, May 23: 129.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1984. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Manning, Susan. 1993. *Ecstasy and the Demon: Feminism and Nationalism in the Dances of Mary Wigman*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Martin, John. 1983. "Metakinesis." In Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen, eds., *What is Dance*: 23-24. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1999. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*: 833-44. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tembeck, Tamar. 2000. "The Staging of Desire: A Feminist Portrait of Marie Chouinard." In Iro Tembeck, ed., *Proceedings of Estivale 2000: Canadian Dancing Bodies Then and Now*: 191-198. Toronto: Dance Collection Danse.